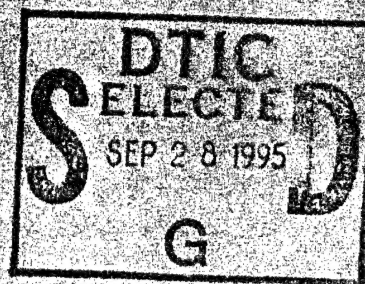


FEDERAL EMPLOYMENT

Pool Service Round at Federal Job Information Centers



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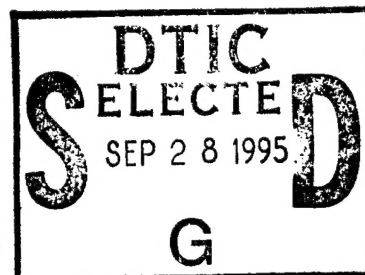
General Government Division

B-248747

July 28, 1992

The Honorable David Pryor
Chairman, Subcommittee on
Federal Services, Post
Office and Civil Service
Committee on Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Gerry Sikorski
Chairman, Subcommittee on the Civil Service
Committee on Post Office and Civil Service
House of Representatives



We are doing a series of reviews of the effectiveness of federal employment practices in attracting and retaining the quality employees agencies need to do their work. This report presents the results of a review of the services provided to job seekers by Federal Job Information Centers (FJIC) operated by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

FJICs are sources of federal job information in many metropolitan areas across the country. Their objective is to answer the public's questions about federal employment opportunities and application procedures and provide the necessary application forms. According to OPM, FJICs are vital information sources that can shape the public's views about federal employment. OPM says quality service by FJICs encourages quality applicants.

Our staff members telephoned and visited 20 of the 40 FJICs that were open on a walk-in basis at the time of our study.¹ (App. I lists the FJICs our staff visited.)

At each FJIC, 1 to 3 staff members sought answers to an identical set of 15 questions a typical job seeker might ask. (See app. II for the list of questions.) They browsed through printed material, used computer equipment, and spoke with FJIC employees. In this way, our staff experienced firsthand what people experience when seeking federal employment information from FJICs.

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¹The 40 FJICs were located in 31 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Oklahoma had an FJIC that provided information by mail or telephone only. Eighteen states had no FJICs: Arkansas, Delaware, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

Results in Brief

In our contacts with FJICs, we encountered a number of obstacles that would likely frustrate prospective applicants and perhaps discourage them from pursuing federal employment. For example, multiple telephone calls were often required to reach an FJIC. Callers were connected on the first try in only 18 of 43 attempts. In six cases the callers never got through.

Upon visiting FJICs, we generally found them to be clean and organized, though small, sparsely furnished, and uninviting. When using the available resources, we found that printed material and computers could answer only the most basic of our 15 questions about federal employment. This could present problems for job seekers because at some FJICs printed material and/or computers were the only sources of information.

Twelve of the 20 FJICs we visited were staffed by OPM information specialists; however, they were usually available only part of the day. Compared to the printed material and computers, the information specialists were better able to address our staff members' questions, but their answers were sometimes incomplete or inaccurate.

Contacting FJICs by Telephone Was Often Difficult and Time Consuming

As many applicants would do, our staff members began their search for federal job information by seeking to contact FJICs by telephone. The FJICs we visited were all listed in local telephone books; however, 13 were included as a subheading of OPM, so applicants calling those FJICs would have to know they were part of OPM in order to find their telephone numbers.

Once they had the correct telephone numbers, our staff members had difficulty reaching many FJICs. Because the lines were often busy, getting through on the first attempt was difficult, and in some cases contacting an FJIC required great perseverance. Of our 43 staff members who telephoned FJICs, 18 were connected on the first try. However, 6 staff members had to make 2 or 3 calls, and 13 made 4 or more calls before the connections were made. Six staff members never got through even though they tried a minimum of five times each.

Because of busy signals, 1 staff member dialed the Indianapolis FJIC 15 times during a 20-minute period before getting through. Another staff member called the Norfolk FJIC 27 times in 1 day between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., and each time the line was busy. To reach the Kansas City FJIC, it took 6 calls during a 3-hour period while 1 of the staff members trying to contact the Atlanta FJIC gave up after 13 attempts in 2 days. Likewise, 1

staff member's 10 attempts over 4 hours to reach the Albuquerque FJIC were unsuccessful.

At all but one FJIC, our staff members' calls were picked up by answering machines that gave recorded information on such topics as federal job vacancies and application procedures. (The telephone was answered by an OPM employee at the Atlanta FJIC.) The recordings at several FJICs allowed people to leave messages for their calls to be returned or to receive application materials. Callers to the Washington, D.C., FJIC could wait to speak to an OPM information specialist after first listening to a recorded message. However, one staff member waited 10 minutes before someone came on the line.

At three FJICs our staff called, the recordings were difficult to hear because of extraneous noise or malfunctioning answering machines. For example, a high-pitched whistle made it difficult to hear the message at the FJIC in New York City. Likewise, parts of the message at the Philadelphia FJIC were inaudible during several calls because of background noise and static. In one instance the answering machine prematurely disconnected. During two calls to the Los Angeles FJIC, our staff could not hear the entire message because the tape did not start at the beginning of the recording.

FJICs Were Accessible but None Had Extended Hours

After our staff determined the FJICs' addresses, they generally found them easy to locate and accessible to mass transportation. Convenient parking was available at most locations. All but 1 of the 20 FJICs we visited were located either in federal buildings or other downtown office buildings. While the FJIC in Denver was in a bank building about 15 miles from downtown, it was a mile or 2 from other federal offices. Two of our three staff members found this building difficult to locate.

The FJICs were open Monday through Friday but had no evening hours. Although the schedules varied at each location, they were open an average of 7-1/2 hours each day. Two FJICs opened before 7 a.m.; 11 opened between 7 and 8:30 a.m.; and 7 opened at 9 a.m. Nine FJICs closed before 4 p.m.; nine closed between 4 and 5:30 p.m.; and two closed at 6 p.m.

The longest hours were kept by the Boston and Indianapolis FJICs. Their self-service areas opened at 6 a.m. and 6:45 a.m., respectively, and closed at 6 p.m. The shortest hours were kept by the San Francisco and Albuquerque FJICs. They were open for 3 and 4 hours, respectively, each day.

At 12 of the 20 FJICs, OPM information specialists were available to assist visitors and answer their questions. However, in six cases, the specialists were available no more than 4 hours a day. For example, OPM information specialists in Philadelphia, Denver, and New York offered 4 hours of window service each day while the information specialists in San Francisco offered 3 hours of window service.

Conditions at FJICs May Frustrate Applicants

As a rule, the 20 FJICs we visited were clean and organized, though typically small and spartan, with few, if any, chairs or desks. The scarcity of furniture forced many job seekers to complete forms, read, and take notes while standing. Some FJICs were hot or stuffy while others were barren and unappealing.

Depending on the location, federal job information was available from printed materials, touch-screen computers, and OPM information specialists. Our staff sought answers to our set of typical applicant questions by using each source available.

Printed materials consisted primarily of brochures and job vacancy listings. Each FJIC had bulletin boards that contained general information on such topics as application procedures, the Administrative Careers With America (ACWA) program, veterans preference, and current job listings. Seven FJICs also had job vacancy announcements or other information in binders for visitors to use.

Printed Information Not Easily Obtained

The material posted on bulletin boards and in binders was rarely available for visitors to pick up and take home. Just five FJICs had any flyers, pamphlets, or brochures readily available. Typically, the printed material had to be requested from an OPM information specialist (if present), obtained by completing a form, or copied by hand. Likewise, at all but one FJIC job application forms could only be obtained from an OPM information specialist or through the mail after completing a request form.

OPM's Federal Career Directory, a publication containing information on government employment, was only available by request at staffed FJICs. Therefore, job seekers would have to know of its existence in order to use it.

At OPM's headquarters in Washington, D.C., application forms could be obtained directly from labelled cubbyholes. However, at the time of our

visit, about two-thirds of the cubbyholes were empty, including those that were supposed to contain job application forms.

The printed material at the FJICs was usually adequate for answering general questions on federal employment such as salaries and benefits. However, it was insufficient for applicant-specific inquiries, such as our questions dealing with the Presidential Management Intern and Outstanding Scholar programs, applicability of veterans preference to Desert Storm veterans, and procedures for applying for jobs above entry level. At the Chicago FJIC (which, as a self-service center, only had information posted on bulletin-boards), most of our 15 questions went unanswered.

Computers Were Easy to Operate but Not Always Available and Working

Of the 20 FJICs we visited, 10 had computer terminals available for job seekers to use. Nine of these 10 FJICs were staffed by OPM information specialists who could also help job seekers with their questions. The Washington, D.C., FJIC had three terminals while the other nine FJICs each had one. The computers had touch screens that helped users match job vacancies with their qualifications and interests. They also provided general employment information such as salaries and job application procedures.

Typically, few people were in line for the computers, and the wait was usually 5 minutes or less. However, some job seekers had to wait 30 minutes to use the computer at the San Francisco FJIC, and a 20-minute wait was required at the Washington, D.C., FJIC because one of the three computers was not working during our visit. In two of our three visits to each of the Kansas City and New York City FJICs the computer had either been removed or was not turned on. Also, printers jammed or ran out of paper at the Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., FJICs.

Our staff members generally found the computers easy to operate. However, some expressed concern that the computers made them repeat screens after they had returned to the main menu and selected a new topic. Some staff members also reported they could not bypass irrelevant screens. They felt these procedures wasted time.

The computers were best suited to listing job vacancies but least helpful in responding to specific questions. Left unanswered, for example, were questions dealing with upper-level jobs and the need for college

transcripts. Similarly, only specific job vacancy announcements could be printed from the computers. Other information had to be hand-copied.

Information Specialists Were Typically Helpful but Sometimes Inaccurate

With few exceptions, the information specialists at the 12 staffed FJICs were friendly, patient, and helpful with visitors. Our staff noted that the help provided by information specialists in Boston, Denver, and San Francisco was particularly useful. The average wait to speak to an information specialist was 5 to 6 minutes, and many staff members encountered no wait.

Though better able to answer applicant-specific questions than printed material and computers, the information specialists did not always give satisfactory responses. In several instances, they merely referred our staff to a brochure or back to the bulletin boards (which did not have enough information to answer our applicant-specific questions).

At the New York City FJIC, for example, an information specialist could not provide information on the Federal Employees Retirement System when our staff asked about government benefits. She said the FJIC did not have any brochures on the government's retirement plan and that such information could be obtained at a job interview. She was also unable to provide information on federal intern programs, saying that this information would not be available for another 3 months.

Although most of the questions were answered accurately, there were several notable exceptions. For example, our staff was incorrectly told that

- the Federal Bureau of Investigation handles applications for the Central Intelligence Agency (this agency does its own hiring);
- an ACWA exam is used to apply for a Central Intelligence Agency position (ACWA exams cover positions outside of the Central Intelligence Agency);
- a grade point average of 3.5 or higher is the only way to qualify for the Outstanding Scholar program (applicants can also qualify by graduating in the upper 10 percent of their class); and
- each agency has its own benefits package (in general, a standard set of benefits applies across the government).

Information Specialists' Responses to Questions Were Often Inconsistent

We were troubled by the fact that the information provided by OPM often varied across the FJICs. As examples, there was no consensus among the information specialists as to whether college transcripts or the SF-171

application form was required by federal agencies; a staff member who visited the Washington, D.C., FJIC was given "Tips for Preparing Your SF-171," a publication that was not provided by any other FJIC; and, when asked what jobs were available for people with international relations degrees, just two information specialists (Portland and Seattle) told our staff about Foreign Service careers.

Additionally, when our staff asked how people with political science degrees should go about applying for jobs, they were given a pamphlet listing federal careers by college major in Los Angeles; told to apply directly to individual agencies in Washington, D.C.; and referred to a list of job openings in Detroit.

Likewise, when asked whether there was a Braille version of the ACWA exams, information specialists said yes in Albuquerque; no, just large print in Washington, D.C.; and no, an OPM staff member reads the questions to a blind test taker and records his or her answers in Los Angeles. (At the time of our study, a Braille version of the ACWA exams was available.)

Conclusions

Our work suggests that FJICs are not effectively serving the public. From our initial attempts to contact FJICs by telephone to using the resources available during our visits, obtaining federal job information was frequently a time-consuming and arduous task. Nearly all of our visits to FJICs without information specialists were unsatisfactory; and, while more favorable outcomes resulted from our visits to staffed FJICs, there were shortcomings in those FJICs as well. Taken together, these problems may unintentionally signal to job seekers that "Uncle Sam does not want you."

Beyond the difficulties in obtaining job information, we are also concerned about the negative image of federal service job seekers may get from FJICs. Stuffy and uninviting offices, bureaucratic procedures, and poor service may reinforce prospective employees' stereotypes of federal workers and the federal government in general.

Recommendation to the Director of OPM

We recommend that the Director of OPM give the FJICs a greater customer focus by improving the services they provide. Steps should be taken to ensure that job seekers receive accurate, timely, and comprehensive employment information with a minimum of delay, effort, and inconvenience. Steps that should be considered include

- installing more telephone lines to increase the likelihood that callers will be able to contact an FJIC without an undue number of busy signals,
- ensuring that recorded messages are audible and computer equipment is properly functioning,
- providing weekend or evening hours to better accommodate job seekers who have daytime commitments,
- furnishing FJICs with tables and chairs to make it easier for job seekers to record information,
- staffing all FJICs with information specialists to answer job seekers' questions and ensure that the answers they provide are correct and complete, and
- making the most frequently requested printed material and application forms available for visitors to take with them.

OPM Comments and Our Evaluation

OPM's Associate Director for Career Entry provided written comments on a draft of this report (see app. III). OPM expressed no disagreement with our findings. Rather, OPM maintained that, by limiting our review to FJIC operations, we had focused on only one component of the federal job information system. OPM said the information system is in transition from separate local information centers to a nationwide network. According to OPM, the system includes or will eventually include electronic bulletin boards; self-service job information computers; a central telephone system available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with an option to speak with an information specialist or leave a message for a specialist to call; a computer-based reference system for information specialists; and a computer link with state job service offices. OPM explained the function of these components and the planned schedule for making them operational.

OPM agreed with our finding that callers often have problems getting through to an FJIC. OPM then went on to describe its Career America Connection, a nationwide, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 900 number that provides federal employment information, at a cost of 40 cents a minute. While we did not review it, any of the successes OPM claims for it should be incorporated into the FJICs since customers will still be calling them for job information.

With regard to our suggestion that OPM ensure that job seekers have access to printed material and application forms at the FJICs, OPM stated this would increase costs and it could not afford to make an "endless supply" of materials available to FJIC visitors. We can appreciate OPM's position, but we believe OPM must also recognize that the current practice of mailing the

materials to requesters could be even more costly when staff time, packaging, and postage costs are considered. Moreover, we believe making available as much desired information as possible at the FJICS is a better way to serve the customers' needs, especially in light of the statistics cited in the OPM letter indicating that about 30 percent of the time it takes more than 5 days for materials to be received by mail.

We have not reviewed the information system components or new software discussed in the OPM letter, but it appears they could be worthwhile steps to help job seekers obtain information on federal employment opportunities. However, they are not substitutes for the personal, "hands-on" service to the public the FJICS should provide.

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

Our principal objective was to assess the quality of service provided by FJICS. To do this, we arranged for staff in our regional offices to call and visit the FJICS closest to them. Our staff went to 20 of the 40 FJICS that job seekers could visit. (App. I contains a list of the FJICS we visited.)

To learn firsthand what job seekers may experience when using an FJIC to obtain employment information, our staff sought answers to an identical set of 15 questions (see app. II). These questions were chosen because we believed they were typical of the types of questions asked by job seekers with little or no knowledge of federal employment. At each FJIC, where available, between one and three staff members browsed through printed material, used computer equipment, and spoke with OPM information specialists.

We did our work from October 1991 to April 1992 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Copies of this report are being sent to the Acting Director of OPM and other interested parties. We will also make copies available to others upon request.

The major contributors to this report are listed in appendix IV. Please contact me on (202) 275-6204 if you have any questions.

Rosslyn S. Kleeman

Rosslyn S. Kleeman
Director, Federal Workforce
Future Issues

Federal Job Information Centers Visited by GAO

FJIC	Number of GAO staff who visited
1. Albuquerque, New Mexico ^a	3
2. Atlanta, Georgia ^a	3
3. Boston, Massachusetts ^a	3
4. Chicago, Illinois	2
5. Dayton, Ohio	3
6. Denver, Colorado ^a	3
7. Detroit, Michigan	3
8. Indianapolis, Indiana	1
9. Kansas City, Missouri	3
10. Los Angeles, California ^a	3
11. New Orleans, Louisiana	1
12. New York, New York ^a	3
13. Norfolk, Virginia ^b	3
14. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania ^a	3
15. Portland, Oregon ^a	3
16. St. Louis, Missouri	1
17. San Francisco, California ^a	3
18. Seattle, Washington ^a	3
19. Syracuse, New York	3
20. Washington, D. C. ^a	3

^aStaffed by an OPM information specialist.

^bThe Norfolk FJIC did not have an OPM information specialist; however, an information specialist was available at a nearby state employment office.

Inquiries Made by GAO at FJICs

Staff members visited the FJICs and used available resources to try to obtain answers to the three groups of questions below. When the questions were posed to OPM information specialists, they were usually divided among three different staff members.

Group I

1. I'll be getting my political science degree this spring. How do I go about applying for a federal job?
2. What is the Outstanding Scholar Provision, and how do I qualify for it?
3. How are upper-level positions (GS-9 and above) filled?
4. What is the Presidential Management Intern Program? How do I apply for it?
5. My reserve unit was called up for Desert Storm. Do I get veterans preference for that? How does it work?

Group II

1. I have a degree in international relations. Are there jobs? Which exam do I take and does it require specific qualifications?
2. How do I get a job with the Central Intelligence Agency?
3. I've always been interested in law enforcement. Which agencies have such positions, and how do I apply for them?
4. Are college transcripts required to get a federal job?
5. Do I have to complete an SF-171 application form to get a federal job?

Group III

1. Do I have to take an exam to get a federal job if my degree is in economics?
2. I completed and passed the Administrative Careers With America (ACWA) business exam in June 1990. Why haven't I gotten a job offer?
3. I have a friend who is legally blind. Is there a Braille version of the ACWA exam?

-
4. What types of intern programs are available in the federal government?
 5. What benefits would I receive as a federal employee?

Comments From the Office of Personnel Management



United States
**Office of
Personnel Management**

Washington, D.C. 20415

JUN 17 1992

In Reply Refer To:

Your Reference:

Ms. Rosslyn S. Kleeman
Director, Federal Workforce Future Issues
General Government Division
General Accounting Office
Room 3858A
441 G Street, NW.
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Kleeman:

We have reviewed the draft report of your study of Federal Job Information Centers. While we respect your opinion about the service in our Job Information Centers, we feel that your review focused on only one component of the Federal job information system. For several years now we have been building a job information network that utilizes the latest in telecommunications technology. We view the system as in transition from separate local information centers to a nationwide network.

In its present state, the job information network includes electronic bulletin boards, self-service job information computers, the 24 hours a day, 7 days a week telephone system, a computer-based reference system for information specialists, and a computer link with State Job Service offices that use the Automated Labor Exchange (a program developed by the Interstate Job Bank with funds from the Department of Labor). All of these components access the Federal Job Opportunities Listing, an automated database of open announcements for positions in the competitive service.

We took particular interest in your experience calling Federal Job Information Centers. We recently completed a survey of Job Information Center customers (March 1992) which showed similar results. On our survey, 38 percent got through on the first call, while another 38 percent got busy signals three or more times. The Career America Connection, Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) nationwide job information telephone service, has the capability of handling seventy-two simultaneous calls. Since its introduction in August of 1989, Career America Connection callers have never received a busy signal, and, in a recent survey (copy enclosed), 87 percent of callers were completely satisfied with the service they received.

This fall we plan to change the Career America Connection from a 900 number to a regular commercial number. In addition we will pilot a new option where Career America Connection callers may speak with an Information Specialist located at our new

Appendix III
Comments From the Office of Personnel
Management

Teleservice Center in Macon, Georgia. If an Information Specialist is not immediately accessible, the caller may leave a name and number and the call will be returned.

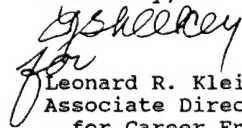
Using state-of-the-art equipment, Information Specialists will have access to a wide range of material on Federal employment and the employment process. The Federal Employment Data System (FEDS) will serve as their primary reference tool integrating information about Federal openings, descriptions of occupations and qualification requirements, pay scales, and examinations. Information on other programs, such as employee benefits, and how to apply for jobs in excepted service agencies, will also be included.

With regard to the availability of printed material and application forms for visitors to take with them, our experience has shown that costs go way up when we provide customers direct access to an endless supply of printed material. We simply cannot afford to do it. Our latest customer survey shows that while 20 percent of our customers obtain the material they want on the day of their visit, more than 50 percent receive it through the mail within 5 days. While perhaps not ideal, we feel that this response time is adequate.

Another new feature that will be added to our job information system this fall is a major enhancement to the self-service job information computers. Customers will be able to use the computers to request application materials for any positions listed on the computer, and a variety of commonly requested brochures and materials about Federal employment programs. Requests will be processed automatically and materials mailed out on the next business day. This new feature eliminates the need for a printer. We are also adding new software to facilitate trouble shooting technical problems at remote locations. We expect fewer problems with maintenance of the new computers.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to respond to the draft report.

Sincerely,


for
Leonard R. Klein
Associate Director
for Career Entry

Enclosure

Major Contributors to This Report

General Government
Division, Washington,
D.C.

Robert E. Shelton, Assistant Director, Federal Workforce Future Issues
Laura G. Shumway, Assignment Manager
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